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CENTER OF GRAVITY

By Rony V. Diaz

The dubious value of public hearings

A CONCEIT of democracy is the infallibility of popular wisdom.

We've carried this notion a step too far. We now allow representatives of people's organizations, NGOs, church groups to "participate" in decision- and policy-making. But the terms and basis of their participation are unclear—perhaps purposely so.

I bring all this up because of two unrelated events that are widely separated in time and space, but are apposite to the matter above.

In 1996 I was asked to head the Secretariat of the Congressional Commission on Agricultural Modernization whose purpose, for those who have forgotten, is to review the country's agricultural policies and to make farming competitive. A joint resolution to this effect was enacted on July 24, 1995.

Among Agricom's tasks was to convene public hearings on various aspects of agriculture. I tried to introduce some science into the way people to be invited to public hearings were chosen using the well-known technique of random sampling. The commission—composed of senators and representatives—predictably turned it down.

One of the "problems" that I brought to these public hearings was irrigation policy.

To prepare for the discussion, my staff and I reviewed all available documents, papers and materials pertaining to this issue. There were not too many.

The reports of the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) were next to useless. The loan agreements that the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and aid-giving agencies negotiated with the government were based on poorly examined assumptions—that large irrigation projects, conflated with flood control and power generation, increased farm productivity and farmer income. How they knew, they did not say.

The only useful papers—in my view then and now—were those written by Dr. Willy David, an engineer/economist on the faculty of the College of Agriculture of the University of the Philippines. His conclusions were persuasive: large-scale irrigation

was not the way to go.

All the public hearings rejected this idea. The representatives of farmers, rural workers and the clergy were one in saying that making farmers pay for the water, to bear part of the cost of operating and maintaining irrigation works, etc. were antipoor. I still recall the venom in the words of a prelate in Tuguegarao who accused the Agricom of denying to poor people "a God-given resource." I retorted mildly that the cost of delivering this resource far outweighed the benefits. I indulged in a bit of levity by saying that the farmers would probably have been better off if the money spent on dams, canals, pumps and what not were divided among them.

Why am I recalling all this now? Last week an international meeting on water was convened in Stockholm, Sweden. There's today a severe shortage of water in some areas of the world. The problem will not go away in the foreseeable future. The solution is to become extra efficient in the use of this finite resource.

One of the reports that the meeting looked at was a "Comprehensive Assessment" by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). The report will be circulated in November 2006.

Enough detail however was revealed at the meeting.

Government and donors are fixated on "grandiose" irrigation projects that have left a third of the world's population short of water.

Almost 95 percent of global water is used in agriculture. This will increase with population growth because it takes 3,000 liters of water to grow enough food for one person every day.

Large irrigation systems encourage the growing of a few crops that are subject to price swings.

Harvesting rain is more efficient and less damaging to the environment than massive irrigation works.

These ideas will not sit well with NIA and the bureaucracy. As they ignored the recommendations of the Agricom they will shelve the recommendations of the CGIAR.

Returning now to the subject of this piece. I'll confess that I ignored the recommendations of the public hearings and chose to follow Dr. David's analysis

and prescriptions.

It's flattering to be confirmed right. But the issue is: are public hearings or consultations useful? Sometimes they are but more often than not they lead to wrong prescriptions. It's far better to rely on expert advice with the caveat that the decision-maker knows how to sift the grain from the chaff.✚